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# Street Gangs— Future Paramilitary Groups?

By Robert J. Bunker, Ph.D., Adjunct Professor, National Security Studies Program, California State University, San Bernardino

he New York and Oklahoma City bombings have shown that the United States is no longer immune to politically motivated terrorist attacks. The latter proved that no part of the country was invulnerable; even worse, the perpetrators may be our own disenfranchised citizens.

Is it possible that street gangs' engaging in such activity looms on the horizon? Although it is unlikely that they would act on a political agenda, the emerging patterns are all too familiar. The expanding presence of street gangs in the United States can be linked both to military trends in the non-Western world and to future warfighting concerns—particularly in terms of the disruption of a society's social organization. One important implication coming from recognition of these trends is that the concept of terrorism itself is being reevaluated by scholars.

#### Street Gangs

At the August 1995 CGIA/ATF National Gang Violence Seminar held in Anaheim, California, Sergeant Jerry Flowers of the Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Police Department spoke eloquently about law enforcement's life-and-death struggle with this growing criminal sector. The most reliable estimates are that some 4,881 gangs with 249,324 members now exist within the United States' major urban centers.<sup>1</sup>

Curious about the extent to which street gangs had set up franchises throughout the country for the purposes of narcotrafficking, I questioned Sergeant Wes McBride of the Los Angeles County, California, Sheriff's Department, a recognized authority on L.A.-based street gangs. He explained that the initial movement of L.A.-based street gangs, primarily Crips and Bloods, had little—if anything—to do with narcotics trafficking. On the contrary, he said, the initial moves were typically family relocations. One of the more common reasons for such relocations was to remove the youthful gang member from

the influence of the local gang—parents were trying to re-establish a non-criminal lifestyle for the gang member.

Unfortunately, in many cases, the move did not achieve the hoped-for result, and the youth proceeded to establish his gang lifestyle in the new territory. On occasion, he would call some of his fellow gang members to come help him establish a gang in new turf, and some narcotic connections would be made, McBride said.<sup>2</sup>

An organized strategy by L.A.-based street gangs to expand their narcotics trade would have meant that some sort of command-and-control hierarchy existed with these gangs. Such a hierarchy would provide a target set that would facilitate combating the problem. Instead, street gangs had spread because of family relocations that failed to end the gang lifestyle.3 McBride also noted, "We don't have drug gangs; we have gangs that have some members who deal drugs." Drug trafficking, it seems, has very little to do with street gangs. In fact, in Los Angeles, only about 25 percent of drug-trafficking instances can be tied to gang members.4

What is the potential for street gangs to engage in domestic acts of terrorism?

"Certainly they have the potential," McBride said, "but probably not the need or desire to attract that kind of attention. We are not dealing with the sophistication of the [Colombian] cartels, [nor is there] the deep-rooted dependency on hierarchical leadership within gangs for domestic terrorism to become an issue." McBride did, however, make a distinction between "conventional" domestic terrorism-a force with a political agenda—and the terrorizing effect of random and pervasive violence. "I believe if we look at the disconnected violence issue involving the gangs," McBride said, "we are 'hip deep' right now in domestic terrorism created by the gangs. Their gang wars and disregard for innocent victims certainly ha[ve] an effect on . . . the well-being of our citizens, but it is not a planned action by the gangs—simply disorganized crime in action."5

Of course, it is much harder to deal with vast numbers of isolated nodes of criminal activity than with a few street gangs that systematically engage in terrorism for some defined political end.

Certain themes in McBride's assessment of L.A.'s street gangs stand out—with an organized pattern of chaos emerging as the dominant attribute of these themes. Accordingly, street gangs can be broadly characterized as

- spreading as a result of family relocations that fail to remove the youth from the gang lifestyle but instead introduce that lifestyle into new communities;
- possessing a nonhierarchical decision-making structure based on uncoordinated nodes (e.g. individual gangs) that take part in seemingly random patterns of activity; and
- engaging in criminal activity that is equivalent in effect to that of endemic low-grade terrorism.

These themes parallel those found in research on emerging forms of warfare and the new form of soldier developing in much of the non-Western world.

#### **Emergent Warfighting Themes**

Military scholars recognize that a new form of soldier, with no allegiance to the nation-state, is developing in much of the non-Western world. Major Ralph Peters, U.S. Army, who is responsible for evaluating emerging threats for the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, terms this threat "The New Warrior Class." It is being taken seriously enough by the U.S. Army to be included in its perceptions of early 21st-century Army operations.

This type of soldier, which has developed as an outcome of a breakdown in social organization in many failed nationstates, operates in subnational groups such as armed bands, private armies, crime networks and terrorist organizations. Debate in professional U.S. military and affiliated journals over the past two years has dealt with concerns that this

new form of soldier may be developing within the United States.

Street gangs would be one logical source from which this new form of soldier could emerge in this country. These gangs have developed in failed inner cities, where poverty and crime run rampant and family social structures have been severely eroded.

Drawing parallels between a city such as Beirut and some U.S. inner-city cores, where many gang members grew up, is not overly difficult. The threat of death or physical harm is significant for a young male growing up in both surroundings, and both fail to provide educational opportunities that can allow for the transformation of this segment of the population into productive and responsible citizens. Today's pre-teenage inner-city children-termed the "super-predators" by Dr. John J. DiIulio, Jr., of Princeton University-bear a striking resemblance to the child soldiers found in numerous private armies throughout the non-Western world.

Further, social norms for many of our youths have become twisted. For example, says Anne Powell, project director of the California Family Impact Seminar on Teenage Pregnancy for the California State Library Foundation, in "street gang culture . . . men get 'points' for how many underage girls they have impregnated. Many of the men are jobless and achieve a sense of dominance through sex. Many of the girls have been abused as children and accept sex with older males as normal."8 After two generations (about 30 to 34 years), children born into such family circumstances would likely consider them a normal pattern of inner-city life. Other skewed patterns of "normalcy," such as a basic disregard for human life or organized looting are not incomprehensible developments in children reared in such environmental conditions.

The nonhierarchical nature of street gangs is also an important factor. In the Army's Force XXI Operations, a new form of battle command based on a nonhierarchical-or "Internetted"-structure is envisioned.9 Internetted structures refer to those entities that rely upon a structure resembling neural networks, with individual nodes connected to one another in "web-like" patterns. Such structures are viewed as applying only to complex, adaptive armies fielded in the future by technically advanced political entities. Such structural concepts can be found in the 1969 creation of the ARPNET, an early predecessor of the Internet. Because of the robust properties of this design, it was foreseen during the Cold War that such an Internetted U.S. communications structure would have a better chance of surviving a potential nuclear exchange than the more traditional existing structure.10

Street gangs appear to represent a type of Internetted structure based on self-sufficient individual nodes never considered by futuristic Army planners. In this case, it is based on a form of social mutation being spread throughout society by individual families attempting to remove their children from street gang influences and, to a lesser extent, by normal family migrations and local gang genesis. A street gang can be eradicated in any one city or town but, because the structure as a whole is based on Internetted gang nodes, fully eliminating this social cancer will be a monumental task.

#### Reevaluating Terrorism

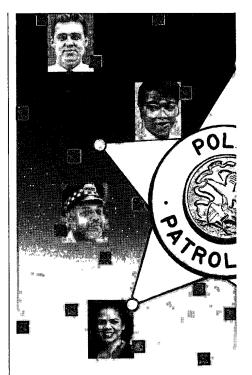
The concept of what terrorism represents *vis-à-vis* future modes of warfare is currently being reevaluated by scholars. The traditional view holds that terrorism is a method by which "terror" or the "threat of terror" is used to obtain some political end. A common image is that of an airliner being hijacked by men in ski masks, whose political demands must be met if the plane and its passengers and crew are to be spared.

Today's terrorism, however, is a far more insidious form of warfare based on social rather than political considerations. It represents a process by which the social fabric of a nation or other form of political community is gradually compromised by repeated trauma to the social psyche. In a war waged between differing forms of social organization, terrorism represents the means by which one society attacks the core beliefs of another.

As early as 1983, Dr. Brian Jenkins of RAND wrote that "[t]errorists are primitive psychological warriors in an information war." It is not surprising, then, that the disorganized criminal actions of street gangs are wreaking "social terrorism" in their areas of operation, as McBride suggests. These gangs are systematically eradicating the older social fabric in their territories and replacing it with their competing form of social organization. In essence, environmental modification is taking place.

#### The Implications

Of all the domestic concerns related to street gangs, probably the one that should be most closely watched is the interrelationship of these gangs to the U.S. military. Street gang members with military training would bring a whole new dimension to law enforcement's struggle with these criminal groups. With members having successfully transformed themselves from gangster to the new form of soldier, street gangs would take on the organization of paramilitary groups and



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actively combat all attempts to restore the rule of law.<sup>12</sup>

Such paramilitary groups would likely prove more than a match for current domestic law enforcement capabilities. With this in mind, the following survey of references to gang activity related to U.S. armed forces has been compiled.

- March 3, 1996, Los Angeles Times: On March 5 at Camp Pendleton, California, in response to a minor incident that had occurred two days earlier, Sergeant Jesse Quintanilla shot and killed Colonel Daniel Kidd and wounded Lieutenant Colonel Thomas A. Heffner with a .45-caliber pistol. After the shootings, Quintanilla calmly walked over to a group of Marines in a helicopter hanger and told them, "I just shot the XO and the CO. I did it for the brotherhood and the brown side. This is only the beginning. We have a hit list. The brothers have been wronged, and others are in the pen, and more will die unless they are released." Quintanilla, who has a tear-drop tattoo at the corner of his eye, had previously come to the attention of base authorities investigating Marines suspected of gang activity.
- July 24, 1995, Newsweek: Street gangs from Los Angeles (the Crips and Bloods) and Chicago (the Folk Gangsters) are active within all of the armed services. While gang activity has been reported at over 50 military bases, most criminal activity is said to be committed off-base. A report generated by a Department of Justice street gang symposium in November 1994 said, "[S]ome gangs have access to highly sophisticated personal weapons such as grenades, rocket launchers and military explosives. Some street gang members who are or have been in the military are teaching other gang members concerning the use of tactics. . . . With arms, weapons proficiency and tactics, some street gangs now have the ability to effectively engage in terrorist activities within the United States."
- January 21, 1995, Deutsche Presse: Gang members who are attempting to escape the gang lifestyle have been volunteering for military service in Texas and California. In the process, they are normally given specialized combat training, which some bring back to their old neighborhoods when they revert to their criminal ways.
- December 29, 1994, Austin American-Statesman: On August 25, 1994, in Arlington, Texas, a member of one of the city's most active street gangs was confirmed to be an off-duty member of one of the Army's special long-range reconnaissance units stationed at Fort Hood. On August 31 in San Diego, California, two soldiers were arrested for stealing a case of hand grenades from a Navy vessel. Eighteen of those grenades were delivered to a Los Angeles

street gang and never recovered. On September 3, Arlington police arrested six soldiers from Fort Riley, Kansas, for attempting to enter the Six Flags Over Texas amusement park without paying admission. Five of these soldiers claimed to be in a Southern California gang, and some were armed with serrated, folding knives.

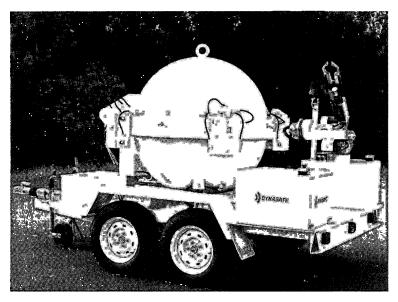
- October 25, 1994, *Omaha World Herald*: Child dependents of Air Force service personnel have brought the gang lifestyle with them to Capehart military housing, near the city of Bellevue, from San Diego and other large cities.
- July 30, 1994, Houston Chronicle: Two members of the Southeast Crips were arrested for the murder of a sixth-grader. The assault rifles they used in the crime were stolen by their street gang during Operation Desert Shield.
- November 19, 1993, Washington Post: Stolen military equipment belonging to the Department of Defense, such as machine guns and grenades, is being stockpiled by street gangs, white supremacists and other groups. The Los Angeles Police gang unit frequently recovers grenades, explosives and booby traps. In six Army and National Guard sites, a Government Accounting Office report concluded that "internal controls were deficient."

These incidents of military-related gang activity should be cause for concern,<sup>13</sup> suggesting as they do that a trend of increased gang involvement within the military may be developing. While the existence of such a trend cannot be confirmed, private conversations with numerous military officers indicate that many bases, both domestic and international, have gang or gang-like problems and that the armed services are actively addressing them.

#### Conclusions

It would be premature to conclude that street gang members are actively evolving into the new form of soldier developing in much of the non-Western world. In fact, research suggests a far more haphazard history.

At the same time, the gangster lifestyle as a nucleus from which this soldier could develop constitutes a very real threat. It represents an alternative form of social organization that has become alienated from more mainstream forms of society based on the rule of law.14 It closely parallels Major Peters' assessment of "[t]he archetype of the new warrior class . . . a male who has no stake in peace, a loser with little education, no legal earning power, no abiding attractiveness to women, and no future."15 Further, while street gang members join the military primarily in order to leave the gang lifestyle behind them and become law-abiding citizens,

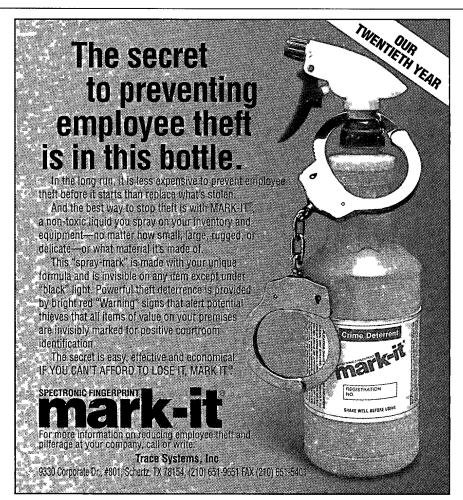


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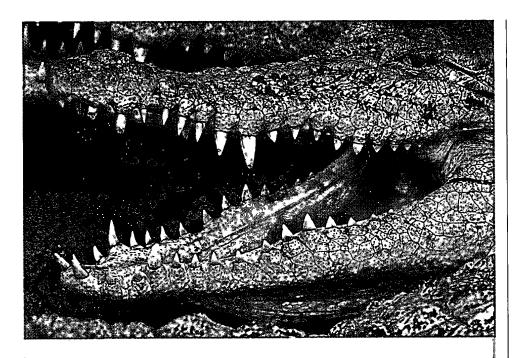
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some of those who return to their former neighborhoods after leaving the service revert back to their old ways with the addition of military combat skills. The power of their former lifestyle is apparently too strong a bond to break—despite boot camp and military resocialization.

We must ultimately recognize that where street gangs operate, a process of environmental modification based on "social terrorism" appears to be taking place.<sup>17</sup> This poses a fundamental problem because war in much of the non-Western world now represents a struggle between competing forms of social and political organization, rather than over traditionally defined issues of national sovereignty.

Street gangs will likely represent a fundamental threat to U.S. security in the future. To respond to this potential threat, law enforcement officials and scholars must begin to establish closer ties to their counterparts in military and national security studies. We must create a coordinated watch on street gang genesis to ensure that the new form of soldier is not allowed to emerge in our neighborhoods. ❖

<sup>1</sup> G. David Curry, Richard A. Ball and Robert J. Fox, "Gang Crime and Law Enforcement Record-keeping," *Research in Brief*, National Institute of Justice, August 1994, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Sergeant Wes McBride, L.A. County Sheriff's Department, conducted at the 1995 National Gang Violence Seminar held in Anaheim,

California on August 17, 1995.

- <sup>3</sup> The migration of the L.A. Crips and Bloods has been reported in 45 western and midwestern cities. Preliminary research findings suggest family migration and local gang genesis may be the predominant factors. James C. Howell, Ph.D., Gangs. Fact Sheet #12, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, April 1994, p. 1.
  - <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
  - McBride.
- Ralph Peters, "The New Warrior Class," Parameters, Summer 1994, pp. 16-26. For more insights, see Martin van Creveld, The Transformation of War (New York: The Free Press, 1991), and Robert Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," Atlantic Monthly, February 1994, pp. 44-76.
- <sup>7</sup> TRADOC Pamphlet 525-5, Force XXI Operations: A Concept for the Evolution of Full-Dimensional Operations for the Strategic Army of the Early Twenty-First Century, 1 August 1994, p. 2-4.
- Tony Perry, "Getting Tough on Teenage Pregnancies," Los Angeles Times, January 7, 1996, p. A21.
   TRADOC Pamphlet 525-5., pp. 2-8 to 2-9.
- RADOC Pampniet 325-3., pp. 2-3 to 2-9.
   See Robert J. Bunker, Ph.D., "Internetted Structures and C2 Nodes," Military Intelligence, April-June
- <sup>11</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, New Modes of Conflict, R-3009-DNA. (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, June 1983), p. 10
- <sup>12</sup> We must also start collecting data on preemptive attacks directed toward police substations such as those that took place in Los Angeles. See "Gang is Blamed in Police Office Bombing," Los Angeles Times, Saturday, July 1, 1995, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Gang involvement with police forces may also be taking place. See "Chicago's Street Gangs Infiltrate Police Ranks," Los Angeles Times, Sunday, October 8, 1995 p. A 16

<sup>14</sup> Other Western industrialized countries are also

being affected by such societal conflict. In France, many housing projects, known as banlieues, have become "virtual no-go areas for the police." "France: Burning 'burbs," The Economist, January 27, 1996, p. 42.

15 Peters, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Although very few, if any, gang members are currently going into the services specifically to learn tactics or steal weapons, it is important to note that members of paramilitary groups such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army entered the British armed forces specifically to gain combat skills. If this should begin to take place with street gang members, we will have an entirely new problem on our hands.

"One method of combating this process is through the concept of "defensible space"—a major component of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED). See Jacob R. Clark, "LEN Salutes Its 1995 Man of the Year, Architect and Urban Planner Oscar Newman," Law Enforcement News, December 31, 1995, p. 1.

# Miami PD Reaches Out to Gang Members with GRASP

In January 1996, a group of committed police officers spent a weekend with 15 young gang members, participating in a ropes course operated by instructors from the Blue Ridge Learning Center in West Dade, Florida. These two days were part of the Miami, Florida, Police Department's new gang prevention program, GRASP.

This effort is particularly important in light of the 80 gangs—with a total membership of approximately 4,700—operating in the city of Miami. As the poorest of all large U.S. cities, Miami has its share of gang-related crime.

In 1992, U.S. police agencies made 2.5 million juvenile arrests. Juveniles accounted for 18 percent of all violent crime arrests in the country, and guns were used in 80 percent of the homicides committed by juveniles. The arrest rate for youths between ages 10 and 17 doubled between 1983 and 1992.

According to "Juvenile Offenders and Victims," a national report from the Department of Justice, if current trends continue, the arrest rate for juveniles will double by the year 2010. The report cited the usual causes for the increase—poverty, single-parent households, minimal education, peer pressure, drug abuse and gangs—as well as a new one; an increase in the juvenile population.

As Dr. Pamela Riley, director of North Carolina's Center for Prevention of School Violence, points out, "[R]esearch shows that young people who have bonded with a positive adult person in their lives are less likely to become violent or become substance abusers." That's where Miami's GRASP (Gang Reduction Activities and Sports Program) comes into play.

Sergeant Joe Rimondi, supervisor of the department's Gang Unit and developer of the program, explains: "GRASP will allow the Miami Police Department to expand the services offered by its gang detail through this new component aimed at diverting at-risk youth from gang membership." Coordinated by Detective Gene Kowalski, GRASP targets juveniles from within the city's four main areas of gang activity: East Little Havana, Shenandoah, Brickell and West Coconut Grove.

Rimondi notes, "GRASP allows dedicated officers who have worked with juveniles for years to participate in trust-building and sports activities with gang members and 'wannabes' in an attempt to bring about positive changes in their lives."

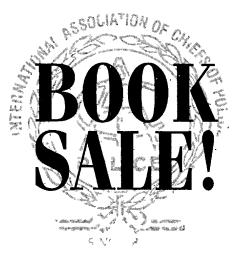
Perhaps the most challenging of the planned activities is the ropes course. Participants are taken to a field equipped like a military training facility, where they are presented with numerous problems and challenges that can only be overcome by communicating effectively, trusting each other and working as a team.

On the first day, the teenagers seemed suspicious of the participating officers and their motives—in all likelihood, because most of them had never associated with police officers in a positive setting. By the end of that grueling day, however, the kids' attitudes had softened, and they were more positive.

On the second day, instructors Greg Affleck and Roger Griffin introduced participants to the high-element section, where a number were forced to confront and—with each other's help—overcome their fear of heights. Officers and teens alike climbed 35-foot poles and walked across beams with nothing to hold onto except a rope strapped to their waists that was anchored by a team on the ground. They also climbed over barriers such as logs and a 50-foot wall, in the process learning more about themselves and each other.

With follow-up counseling and further activities, the Gang Unit expects the program to accomplish its goals: to return drop-outs to school, to improve grades and attendance, and to have at least 85 percent of the participants turn their backs on gang membership. •

— By Officer Bert Finale, Miami Police Department, Florida



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